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ABSTRACT

A description is given of a staff development program designed to bridge the gap between regular teachers and teachers of gifted children. The program is based on the following concepts: (1) teachers must be provided with practical ideas that can be put into place immediately in the classroom; (2) teachers must feel ownership of their own teaching; (3) teachers must receive regular feedback on student progress; (4) the widely diverse experiences of teachers must be recognized and dealt with; (5) teachers are problem-centered in their orientation to staff development; (6) continual support and follow-up must be provided; and (7) the process of change is slow and often difficult. By using the gifted program as a vehicle for staff development activities, there has been outreach to many teachers who would not otherwise have had exposure to the enrichment experiences available and to the assistance in integrating thinking skills into an existing curriculum. By involving as many teachers as possible in various components of the staff development program, it has been possible to bring aspects of gifted education to all children in grades K-6. (JD)

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STAFF DEVELOPMENT: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN PROGRAMS

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BACKGROUND

In Northeast Ohio, as in most of the country, few opportunities for staff development in the area of gifted education are offered to classroom teachers. Yet in virtually every school system which has a gifted education program, children spend more time with their regular classroom teachers than with the gifted education specialist.

The gifted education program in Massillon, Ohio has served as a model for delivering staff development services to classroom teachers. As the program was being developed in 1985, the planning committee (teachers, parents, administrators) felt that a staff development component for classroom teachers was critical for the successful implementation of the program. Rationale for including this training in the program design was based upon several factors, including:

--the classroom teacher's need for knowledge about gifted children and gifted education practices;

--the classroom teacher's need to work with the children who cannot be accommodated by the pull-out component of the program;

--the desire to offer enrichment learning experiences to as many children as possible;

--the understanding that many strategies used in gifted education can be used to develop thinking skills in all children.

The original staff development program was planned to expand the repertoire of strategies and techniques in these experienced teachers' "bag of tricks" and to provide them with ideas and materials for their immediate use in the classroom. Prevalent in the district at that time was a text-driven, read-and-drill approach to curriculum. A few teachers (mostly primary) had learning centers in their classrooms for children to use "after their regular work" was completed. A new director of curriculum and instruction had been hired in 1984, and he was attempting to make inroads in both staff development and curriculum improvements.

RESEARCH

Gusky (1985) developed a model of the process of teacher change. His model stems from the belief that, for staff development to be effective in changing teachers' beliefs and attitudes, it must result first in a change in teachers' classroom practices, which will then result in a demonstrated change in student learning outcomes. Only then, he says, will staff development result in a change in teachers' beliefs and attitudes (p. 58). This concept was one of the bases for building our staff development program for gifted education.

Many researchers have provided us with staff development models and outcomes, as well as characteristics and needs of the adult learner. Implications from this research include the following concepts which we included in our model:

1) Teachers must be provided with practical ideas that can be put into place immediately in the classroom.
2) Teachers must feel ownership of their own learning.
3) Teachers must receive regular feedback on student progress.
4) Teachers bring widely diverse experiences to the staff development program. These must be recognized and dealt with.
5) Teachers are problem-centered in their orientation to staff development.
6) Continual support and follow-up must be provided.
7) The process of change is slow and often difficult.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

There are several goals and components of this program model. Major goals include:

1) conveying an understanding of gifted children--who they are and what their needs are;

2) the identification and use of a variety of academic accommodations and adaptations for gifted students;

3) expanding the teacher's repertoire of strategies and techniques to bring components of the gifted program into the regular classroom for all children.

4) the adaptation of existing curriculum to include integration of thinking skills for all students;

5) providing "bridging" skill lessons for all students, taught by the gifted program teacher.

During the first year of the staff development program, 26 "cluster" teachers took part in an intensive program (45 contact hours) developed by the gifted education coordinator. Now in our third year, 47 of our 58 third, fourth, fifth and sixth grade teachers have taken part in various staff development offerings as part of the program. Six of the seven elementary principals, a kindergarten teacher, and a first grade teacher have also been involved. These sessions focused on the first four goals stated above. Specific sessions included an overview and definitions of giftedness and identification procedures; differentiation of the curriculum, with strategies for accomplishing this; learning styles and their application in the classroom; strategies such as inquiry, discovery learning, creative problem solving, and cooperative learning; how, why and when to incorporate learning centers in the classroom; and classroom management.

An important part of this model is the "bridging" component. The gifted program teacher (resource teacher) provides whole class lessons within the regular classrooms of our cluster teachers on a six-week cycle. These lessons are designed to attain the goal of providing enrichment and bringing aspects of the gifted program to all students. They also function as demonstration lessons for the cluster teachers. The lessons include logical thinking, creativity, and creative problem solving. Follow-up activities are left for the classroom teacher to use as he/she

feels is appropriate--as enrichment, as whole class activities, or for use by the children in a learning center. The response to this component has been very positive. Classroom teachers feel more confident using the strategies after they have seen them demonstrated with children. Although they practiced the strategies in their workshop sessions, they are generally uneasy about trying them with their own classes until they know that they will "work with real kids" (i.e., their students).

Another aspect of "classroom out-reach" is provided by the gifted education coordinator. Although program supervisors are usually not welcomed into classrooms with open arms, it is made clear during the workshops that the coordinator is available on request to teach demonstration or special lessons in classrooms. These lessons are often taught in classes where teachers have been through the cluster teacher workshops but do not have identified students in their present classes. Cluster teachers (and many other teachers in the district) also request the coordinator to teach special lessons to their classes. Some of these have involved sign language, causes of the Revolutionary War, Lewis and Clark Expedition, immigration, and problem solving lessons. As the initiator of the content of these lessons, the teachers feel ownership in the program, receive ideas through demonstration and modeling, and continue to exhibit change in practices, beliefs and attitudes. The support they receive through this process is important to them because they will then continue to try new ideas, ask for help, and become excited when they receive positive feedback from their students.

IMPLICATIONS

As we make teachers aware that there are differences in children's learning, we are also helping them to understand what those differences are. Through constant support and feedback, we are helping them to understand that they must teach differently to promote learning. "Developmentally appropriate" has become a buzz-word in education today, and our teachers are constantly being exposed to

developmentally appropriate materials, activities and strategies. They are seeing that involved children pose fewer discipline problems than passive children. Manipulatives have found their place in the classroom, especially the use of Cuisenaire rods, tangrams, and problem solving materials. Competency based education (and corresponding testing program) has provided feedback about skill mastery that is unprecedented in Massillon. As a result, teachers are more aware of individual abilities and are beginning to plan for these differences--and are asking for help in doing so.

As the ripple effects of change slowly permeate the school system, teachers are moving from awareness toward change that can bridge the gap between the gifted program and the regular classroom program. Appropriate strategies and critical thinking skills are being included in courses of study as they are written and revised. Teachers are asking for staff development to be "like the gifted program;" they feel that the district has shown a definite commitment with this model and want it duplicated in other inservice activities. Dettmer (1986) says: "A comprehensive 'umbrella' of gifted education inservice and staff development would be a natural tool for initiating an overarching climate of educational progress to more effectively nurture all student potential" (p.101). As staff development grows from one-day offerings to longer-term programs and a way of life for staff members, the influence of the gifted education model can be seen. Although the process of change is slow, it is steady and is steadily increasing its pace.

Although the primary focus of this program is for teachers in grades 3-6, other services are also being provided on an individual basis to both teachers and students. The coordinator is providing materials and assistance to first grade teachers with children who are reading beyond the level of most in the class. Acceleration in math is being facilitated for junior high students. Individual educational options are being expedited for two ninth grade students with exceptional talents in math and music. An art teacher has designed and implemented an advanced

art class for talented eighth grade students. Teachers are beginning to ask for ideas and help with cooperative learning strategies within their classrooms. Many teachers have asked for assistance with children who seem to have special abilities. Teachers who are becoming aware of literature based reading and the whole language approach to learning have been requesting assistance in implementing these approaches and programs into the existing curriculum.

SUMMARY

By providing these staff development experiences for our classroom teachers, we have conveyed to them their importance in the implementation of the total range of gifted education in Massillon City Schools. By using the gifted program as a vehicle for staff development activities, we have been able to reach out to many teachers (and, thus, to many children) who would not otherwise have had exposure to the enrichment experiences available and to the assistance in integrating thinking skills into the existing curriculum. By involving as many teachers as possible in various components of the staff development program, we have been able to bring aspects of gifted education to all children in grades K-6. By having the gifted education coordinator serve as a staff development leader, teachers at all grade levels feel free to call upon the resources of the program for assistance. Through all of these staff development activities, the best strategies from gifted education are being used to enhance the learning of all of our students--going beyond the boundaries of gifted education to nurture giftedness throughout the school system.

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